RUNNING HEAD: Radicalization or Reaction

Radicalization or Reaction: Understanding Engagement in Violent Extremism in Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade various theoretical models of radicalization or pathways into engagement in violent extremism have been developed. However, there is a dearth of primary data based on direct contact with violent extremists to test these models. In order to address this weakness we analysed accounts of engagement in violent extremism produced by former Northern Irish loyalist and republican paramilitaries to explore their understanding of how and why they engaged in this seemingly politically motivated violence. A thematic analysis incorporating aspects of interpretative phenomenological analysis was employed to gain an understanding of these accounts. While the analysis of the interview transcripts produced findings that share similarities with many of the theoretical models, they challenge the importance of ideological radicalization in fuelling initial engagement in violent extremism. Instead, the results demonstrate the importance of collective identity, reaction to events, perceived threats, community grievance and peer and family influences, in fuelling initial engagement with the armed groups. While insulation and small group pressures within the organizations then amplify identity, threat perceptions, and biases, which increase feelings of efficacy and engagement in violence. Finally, the findings discuss the role of imprisonment in ideologically radicalizing the participants, which in turn allows the paramilitaries to both sustain and rationalise their violent extremism.

Key Words: radicalization, terrorism, Northern Ireland, violent extremism, political violence

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Since the terror attacks on 9/11 and the bombings on the train and underground networks in Madrid and London in 2004 and 2005 respectively, there has been a major growth in research exploring the routes into violent extremism and the mechanisms that lead individuals and groups to commit these violent acts (Horgan, 2005). Since then this interest has been further fuelled by the rise and fall of Islamic State (ISIS), while the recent terror attacks across Europe, Canada, the US and elsewhere have renewed policy interest in these processes, which in turn, have further accelerated research in this area (Jasko, LaFree & Kruganski, 2016).

While there are clear developments in this field and, in particular in the design of models or pathways exploring radicalization (for example, Borum, 2011; Ferguson & Binks, 2015; Kruglanski et al, 2014; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; Moghaddaam, 2005). The research in this area is still marred by the same problems that have been well discussed for twenty years (e.g., Horgan, 2003; King & Taylor, 2011; Jensen, et al., 2016; Nacos, 2016; Schuurman, 2018; Silke, 1998; 2001; Victoroff, 2005). Such as, a lack quality primary data, lack of direct contact with violent extremists, problems with defining ‘radicalization’ and ‘terrorism’, the complex multifaceted range of factors involved, methodological shortcomings, researchers working in isolation, or interloping in the area and then returning to their primary fields; all leading to a lack of consistent theory development.

Northern Ireland, like many countries across the globe has born witness to a prolonged period of civil unrest, inter-communal strife and politically motivated violence, commonly viewed as terrorism. While the levels of violence in Northern Ireland have reduced dramatically since the signing of the Good Friday (or Belfast) Agreement in 1998 (The Agreement: Agreement Reached in the Multi-party Negotiations, 1998) the society is still highly segregated and community relations have been in decline over the past few years (Ferguson & McKeown, 2016). Additionally, dissident Irish republicans remain committed to using violence to remove the British presence from Northern Ireland and the threat level of Northern Ireland-related terrorism is currently judged to be ‘severe’ meaning that an attack is ‘highly likely’, this threat level is in line with the threat from international terrorism in the UK (MI5, 2019).

Even with these continuing tensions post-agreement Northern Ireland can still be regarded as a benign environment to research issues around violent extremism, in comparison to Afghanistan, Syria or Iraq, for example (Mac Ginty, Muldoon & Ferguson, 2007). Therefore, it offers an opportunity for research to be conducted on issues around radicalization and violent extremism that have the possibility to overcome many of the weaknesses in the current research reported above. Additionally, previous research from Northern Ireland exploring engagement with paramilitary groups has tended to take a social movement perspective (Bosi & De Fazio, 2017), or explored political violence through the lens of the social identity approach (e.g., Cairns & Darby, 1998). Therefore, the application of these contemporary approaches to the Northern Irish conflict could offer novel insights into longstanding debates about the relative importance of psychological and structural factors in fuelling engagement with armed groups and political violence in Northern Ireland (Tonge, 2006; Whyte, 1991).

This article aims to address some of the weaknesses in this previous research, firstly by exploring the current state of research on radicalization or engagement in violent extremism. Then by presenting a qualitative analysis based on the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, 1995; 1996) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the narrative accounts of former combatants from the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), the Red Hand Commando (RHC), Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA). This analysis will explore individual routes into these paramilitary groups and engagement in politically motivated violence during the ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland, and will also examine how these accounts map onto current social science conceptions of radicalization and engagement in violent extremism.

Pathways to Violent Extremism

Research aimed at understanding the antecedent factors or processes involved in violent extremism is wide ranging and developing in its sophistication (Ferguson, Burgess & Hollywood, 2008; Jensen et al., 2016; Jensen, Atwell Seate & James, 2018). The conception of radicalization has been central to this research area, and while this concept is contested and difficult to pin down, it can be viewed as a transformational process through which individuals, and/or groups experience a conversion from contributing to political debates by recognized legitimate political means, to adopting extremist ideologies and engaging in politically or ideologically motivated violence (Borum, 2011).

Pathways into violent extremism are multilevel and involve factors spanning the exo, macro, meso and micro levels of analysis, combining intra-individual factors, community and societal context with global ideological forces (Ferguson & Binks, 2015; Ranstorp, 2016; Schmid, 2013). Research over past twenty years has offered some insights into these processes, with some factors consistently reported across different contexts, within ideologically diverse armed groups and across individual extremists of all ideological and political hues (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2008; Ranstorp, 2016).

While there is not space in one article to deal with all these common antecedent factors in any meaningful detail; they include perceptions of a grievance, an injustice or perceived discrimination (Coolsaet, 2016; Piazza, 2006), experiences of trauma (Simi et al., 2015; Speckhard, 2006), feelings of uncertainty (Hogg, 2014; 2016), friendship and kinship ties to movements (Bond, 2014; Lindekilde, Bertelsen & Stohl, 2016; Sageman, 2004), community support for the extremist group (Burgess, Ferguson & Hollywood, 2007), group membership offering rewards (financial, status, sexual, etc.; Horgan, 2005), desire for revenge (Crenshaw, 2003), trigger moments (Burgess, Ferguson, Hollywood, 2005), self-identification with the extremist group (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2007), a quest for significance (Kruglanski, et al. , 2014), and age and gender associations (Bakker & de Bont, 2016; Silke, 2003).

While some of these factors have received volumes of support, such as a perceived grievance or injustice (Jensen, et al. 2016) others such as a need for a quest for significance have received less to date (Jasko, et al. 2016). However, even this brief list illustrates the scale of the problem involved in understanding the causal processes that move an individual to engage in politically or ideologically motivated violence. In addition, while many people share similar antecedent experiences, only a minority become ideologically radicalized or progress to engage in extremist violence (Borum, 2011). Indeed, as Della Porta and La Free (2012) point out, much seemingly politically or ideologically motivated violence is actually perpetrated by people who have not been politically or ideologically radicalized.

In the last decade or so researchers have begun to bring this research together to develop numerous models of radicalization and engagement in violence extremism (for example, Borum, 2003, 2004, Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; Gill, 2007; Kruglanski et al, 2014; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; Moghaddam, 2005; 2007; Pisoiu, 2011; Precht, 2007; Sageman, 2008; Silber & Bhatt, 2007, Sinai, 2012; Taarnby, 2005; Taylor & Horgan, 2006; Wiktorowicz, 2005). Again, this article does not have the scope to explore each of these models in any depth, however, the similarities and differences have been explored to some extent elsewhere (e.g., King & Taylor, 2011). While Jensen et al, (2016) as part of the Empirical Assessment of Domestic Radicalization (EADR) programme at START, University of Maryland compiled many of these models and the antecedent factors discussed above, finding considerable overlap across the models.

From the analysis of the compiled models, the EADR team identified approximately 70 causal mechanisms, which have been proposed as antecedent factors for radicalization and engagement in extremist violence by researchers. These ranged from intra-personal factors, through to group level factors. To make these theoretical mechanisms more manageable they divided the causal mechanisms over 10 distinct conceptual constructs based on conceptual similarities, which reflect the common antecedent factors discussed earlier. These constructs were: (a) personal crisis, these were experiences that caused the individual difficulty and could lead to a crisis driven cognitive opening to radicalization; (b) psychological vulnerability, which make people susceptible to extremist messages and groups; (c) material rewards, such as status; (d) recruitment, access to extremists groups; (e) group biases, both ingroup and outgroup pressure, such as groupthink (Janis, 1982) and threat; (f) group norms, exposure to messages about group beliefs and the role of persuasive leaders; (g) cognitive frame alignment, the process of learning and aligning with radical beliefs; (h) community crisis, external threats to the ingroup and collective crises; (i) psychological rewards, finding significance, and recognition; and (j) physical vulnerability, physical, material or community distress.

Jensen et al’s (2016) analysis of these conceptual constructs found that when cognitive frame alignment and community crisis are combined they are very close to the necessary conditions for radicalization to violent extremism. In other words, having a sense of being a member of the community that has been collectively victimized is key to setting the contextual environment for radicalization to be possible. This also lends further support to the importance of the perceived grievance and feelings of uncertainty antecedents discussed earlier (Hogg, 2014; Piazza, 2006).

The findings also indicate the importance of social identity, psychological and emotion vulnerabilities combined with perceptions of community victimization in persuading individuals that the problems they face are due to threats to their community. Indeed, Hogg (2014; 2016) argues that identifying with or accentuating the entitativity of the group is an effective strategy to reduce feelings uncertainty and threat. Also they demonstrate that once people join groups and these secretive entitative groups become more insular and isolating, mechanisms of cognitive bias and groupthink create a risky shift and push the racializing individual towards violence. Jenson et al. (2016) also demonstrate that for most violent extremists material factors are rarely the main drivers of radicalization. Importantly the analysis also demonstrates the complexity of these processes, as the 500 possible combinations of causal mechanisms studied by Jensen et al. (2016) only accounted for 20 of the 35 violent individuals who made up the cases studies for their analysis.

This present study aims to build on this previous research by exploring the narratives of former combatants from all the mainstream illegal armed groups based in Northern Ireland, to explore how accounts of joining paramilitary organizations and their understandings of engagement in politically motivated violence map onto the antecedent factors and pathway models discussed above.

The Northern Irish Conflict and Paramilitary Groups

While the conflict in Northern Ireland is often viewed as a religious war between Irish Catholics and Ulster Protestants, these religious identities are badges of convenience (Ferguson & Gordon, 2007) which reflect a desire either to remain part of the United Kingdom or to unify with the Republic of Ireland. During the latest period of sustained violence between 1968 and 1998, approximately 3,600 people were killed and an additional 40,000 to 50,000 were injured, in what was the worst period of violence in Western Europe since the Second World War (Fay, Morrissey & Smyth, 1998; Tonge, 2006). During the conflict and since the 1998 Agreement most of the casualties related to the security situation in Northern Ireland have been killed or injured by loyalist or republican paramilitary groups (Sutton, 2017).

It must be remembered that Northern Irish paramilitary groups are not a militarised police force or a local auxiliary militia, instead, they are illegal armed militant groups that employed politically motivated violence or terrorism, either in an attempt to force a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland (Irish republican groups), or to maintain Northern Ireland’s position within the United Kingdom (Ulster loyalist groups). This article will analyse the data created by a series of interviews with members or former members of both republican and loyalist armed groups. The republican paramilitaries interviewed were members of the both the Official and Provisional wings of the IRA and the smaller INLA which split from the Official IRA in 1974. The loyalist paramilitaries interviewed were members or former members of the UDA, UVF and RHC. Almost all of the interviewees were also former prisoners having served sentences for scheduled offences relating to their participation in politically motivated violence and/or had been interned without trial in the 1970’s under the Special Powers Act.

The Current Study

This study will explore the individual accounts of Northern Irish militants who engaged in politically motivated violence to either remove the British from Ireland or maintain the Union with Great Britain. The study will explore how the accounts provided by Northern Irish extremists map onto or reflect the models of radicalization and engagement in violent extremism, and in particular, the recent findings of Jensen et al, (2016) which compiles a substantial number of the these conceptual models.

Method

*Participants & Data Collection*

The participants (n= 110) were all members or former members of paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland. The interviewees were either members of the IRA (n=30) or the INLA (n=9), the UDA (n=20), UVF (n=48) or RHC (n=3). The sample was predominantly male (n=102). Almost all of the participants (n=105) had served prison sentences for politically motivated violence, such as murder, armed robbery, use of explosives and attempted murder or had been imprisoned during interment[[1]](#footnote-1). While the interviewees where drawn from across Northern Ireland, the majority of the interviews took place in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry. All the participants had been previously interviewed by research teams involving the first or second author as part of a variety of research projects. The participants were a mix of active and former members of the paramilitary organizations, and the sample contained a mix of leadership and ‘rank and file’ members. Due to the anonymization of the original interview transcripts, it was not possible to provide exact data on the composition of rank, length of service or membership status of the participants.

The large sample was collected to allow for variation (Langdridge, 2007), so that while the participants were selected because they had the shared the same experience (i.e., getting engaged with armed groups and committing extremist violence) we also deliberately sampled from different groups (i.e., all mainstream republican and loyalist paramilitary groups sampled from across Northern Ireland). This allowed us to investigate the underlying phenomenon regardless of the participants’ ideological, national, religious or geographical background. The original research had received ethical approval from one of the authors’ universities and the reanalysis of the data gained ethical approval from the first author’s university and from the Centre for Research and Evidence of Security Threats (CREST).

All of the interviews were semi-structured and allowed the participants to speak for as long as this wished on a number of topics related to the interviewees’ experiences and opinions on the Northern Irish conflict, imprisonment and peace process. All of the interviews lasted between 30 and 200 minutes and had been audio recorded in a location known to the participant, and where they felt comfortable being interviewed. The previous research projects, which provided the pool of transcripts, had been conducted to explore a variety of topics and not necessarily, their routes into these armed groups. However, during the interviews the participants discussed how and why they became members of the different armed groups as part of their wider life story narrative.

All participants provided oral or written consent for their participation. All the interviews were transcribed and anonymised to maintain the interviewee’s confidentially and anonymity. In order to firmly maintain anonymity the Ethics committee based at CREST requested that the quotes presented should not be in the interviewees own words, thus all quotes presented here are paraphrased from the original transcripts in order to maintain interviewer anonymity as required by the Ethics committee. In order to maintain the coherence and integrity of the paraphrased quotes both authors reviewed the original and paraphrased quotes to check that meaning expressed in the both versions of the quotes was consistent.

*Data Analysis*

The collection of anonymised transcripts were analysed in line with principles and processes common to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As the research aimed to make sense of how people make sense of their lived experience the analysis was also guided by principles shared with IPA (Smith, 1995, Smith Jarmon & Osborn, 1999) and the patterns in the data were primarily identified inductively (Patton, 19990). The data analysis began with the first author reading and re-reading the transcripts, and noting down initial ideas, with a particular focus on aspects of the interview that explored accounts of becoming engaged with armed groups, moving towards engagement in political violence, or engaging in violence and the participants’ narrated understanding of these actions.

In the second phase of analysis, the first author analysed the transcripts line-by-line, and noted anything of psychological interest and generated an initial list of codes on the left-hand margin. These codes were grounded in the participants narrated experiences and were driven by the data. After all the transcripts had been systematically worked through, with each transcript being treated with equal importance, while allowing new themes to emerge from successive transcripts (Smith et al., 1999), the third phase of analysis began. In this phase the transcripts are compared to collate, refine and reduce the different themes being raised from the data set to produce inclusive superordinate themes and to check for sub-themes. While doing this the first author repeatedly returned to the transcripts and explored the narratives to ensure each theme was raised from the participant’s accounts and that the themes reflected the meaning in the data.

As mentioned above, the data was analysed inductively, thus the themes raised were not related to the specific questions asked in the interviews. Thus, the analysis was data driven, without trying to fit the previous conceptualized radicalization models, or the routes into violent extremism discussed in the introduction (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After the first author completed the analysis the second author began a process of audit to enhance the qualitative validity of the findings (see Yardley, 2000). The audit involved the second author independently conducting an examination of the transcripts, summary documents, coding and themes identified by the first author in line with accepted procedures (Yin, 1989). This audit was designed to gauge the extent to which the first author’s interpretations of data were grounded in participants’ accounts, and to gauge the extent to which emerging themes adequately represented the data, were sensitive to the context, demonstrated rigour, and were coherent.

Results

Through the analysis it became clear that while there were many similarities amongst the themes raised by both loyalist and republican paramilitaries, which will be the main focus of this article, there were also differences in their accounts of their routes into extremist violence. Most of this variation was related to surface content (e.g., police brutality leading to involvement with the IRA, while republican brutality led to involvement with the UDA). Rather than the deeper latent content that dealt with the underlying conceptual assumptions (e.g., perceived victimization by the outgroup leads to involvement in armed violence) which shaped this surface content (Boyatzis, 1998; Patton, 1990).

There were also some geographical differences in some of the accounts of mobilization amongst the rural and urban paramilitaries, and temporal differences over the 30 years of conflict (e.g., the impact of Bloody Sunday in 1972, or later the impact of the Hunger Strikes in 1981 promoting involvement with the IRA). While the analysis aims to explore the themes shared across the participants, these variations will also be explored within the themes when appropriate.

The four themes are presented with paraphrased extracts from the participants to allow the reader to see how the themes were developed (Smith et al., 1999). The first theme is ‘reaction to local events’, and contains the sub-themes ‘naivety, identity and fear’ and ‘no alternative’. The second theme explores the role of ‘peer and family influences’ in fuelling engagement in violence. The third theme explores the role of ‘ingroup pressures’ that are created when people join these secretive small groups. The fourth theme explores the importance of ‘imprisonment’ in radicalizing the interviewees.

*Theme 1: Reaction to Local Events*

It was clear from the transcripts that engagement in violent extremism was primarily driven by reactions to what was happening in the local community, rather than being driven by political ideology. For some participants they could point to a particular incident or ‘trigger moment’, which fuelled a ‘Pauline conversion’ into violent extremism, as illustrated by this volunteer.

I was 15 years of age at the time, and me and my friends were going into town one Saturday afternoon to buy records, and stuff. That particular afternoon when we were going into the town and we heard about a bomb on the Shankill Road, they [the IRA] bombed the Balmoral showroom on the Upper Shankill. We went to the scene and helped to dig the bodies out of the rumble, two babies died in that bomb. It just had a real impact on me. We came back up home and we sat and talked about it and discussed it. And basically we came to the conclusion that there were people out there that were wanting to kill us. It didn’t matter what sex we were or what age we were as long as we were Protestants, they wanted to blow us all up. We knew that the UDA had just formed and we knew that we had their meetings on a Sunday morning, so the next day we went and joined the Ulster Defence Association. (T84, UDA, Belfast)

It also important to note, that the trigger event is not a simple Pavlovian stimulus evoking a response, instead the critical incident creates a state of dissociation that forces the individual to consider their future, and make a conscious decision to pursue violence or join an armed group. However, for most interviewees it was a combination of the daily events they witnessed first-hand, mixed with discussions within their community, and being subjected to the constant media coverage of the violence over months or years, which pushed them towards engaging in violence, rather than one particular trigger event.

It [reason for joining the IRA] was because of what was happening all around us at that time. We were just kids when Bombay Street was being burnt down. I remember the riots, not really understanding them, but I knew it was a case of us versus them. 1969 was the central year when everything changed. I watched the streets being burnt down, and I knew people from my class who lived in those streets under attack. Back in school after the summer holidays, I heard all the stories from the kids who had been burnt out of their homes. Everybody was joining the Fianna [Fianna Éireann - the IRA youth wing]. That seemed to be a way of reacting against something you’d been powerless to stop. It gave you a sort of strength. (T51, PIRA, Belfast)

Also as noted by the two participants above, joining an armed group and engaging in a reactive violence was an attempt to address the feelings of fear, threat or uncertainty these events and encounters instilled in them.

*Sub-theme 1: Naivety, Identity and Fear*

When the interviewees reflected on why and how they became involved with the paramilitary groups their accounts reflected how they were politically and ideologically naïve when they joined. Rather than ideological radicalization fuelling their engagement it was a sense of identity and affinity with their community, mixed with feelings of fear that their community was facing an existential threat that drove their initial engagement with armed groups.

When I was a teenager and I used to sit and listen to older republicans. And I gained an awareness that the armed struggle wasn’t planned. We just reacted to what was happening in the street. There were riots, and then the army would open up with rubber bullets and tear gas. For example, when Danny O’Hagan was killed for throwing a petrol bomb, someone said go and get a gun, got a machine gun and shot the first soldier they saw. So I don’t think there was any plan. I think it was just a reaction to what was going on. (T53, PIRA, Belfast)

*Sub-theme 2: No Alternative*

One of the factors that pushed the interviewees towards violence, was a sense that violence was the only course of action which was going to make a political change. They did not feel that the fear, uncertainty or injustice they felt could be alleviated peacefully, or that when peaceful protest had been employed to bring change, it had failed in the face of opposition violence. Therefore, the necessary response was to smash the state or terrorise the terrorists in order to remove the fear, threat and uncertainty they felt.

When the Troubles started, I felt that all working class loyalist communities were under threat from the IRA. I believed that the constitution was under threat and I believed you couldn’t beat IRA terrorism within the rule of law. I believed that hands of the police and security forces were tied and the only alternative was to go outside the rule of law and fight terror with terror. (T22, UVF, Belfast)

I wasn’t exposed to socialism in any shape or form. Political awareness didn’t come until the prison. Even though the organization is left-wing, it wasn’t a case of this is for some great political ideology, it was a case of just getting guns. The aim was to get the British out and the only way to do that was through violence. (T30, INLA, Belfast)

*Summary of Theme 1*

The accounts of involvement in violence, illustrate that sectarianism, intergroup biases, feelings of uncertainty and threat perceptions were much stronger forces pushing people towards violence than adherence to a particular ideology, or even a grand strategy to win the conflict. The individuals also could not visualize a peaceful or constructive solution to the conflict, it was a zero-sum game, and they believed that only increasing the violence suffered by the other side would force them to back down or retreat.

*Theme 2: Peer and Family Influences*

Peer groups played important roles in pushing people into joining armed groups. This was often linked to the excitement of getting involved in the violence on the streets around them, and through running with gangs of likeminded youths, who began to gravitate towards the paramilitary groups in their communities.

Everyday after school there’d be a riot. Then the Brits would react with plastic bullets and rubber bullets, and we used to try and catch them and stuff. So it really was a reaction to events on the ground that was behind my decision to join. Along with the fact I’d friends who joined. (T31, INLA, West Tyrone)

The main reason for me joining the UDA was that my big brother was in the UDA, some of my family and friends were all in it. So it was more like more peer pressure than anything to join. I didn’t have member of my family killed or anything like that. (T86, UDA, Belfast)

For some it was the ‘hip thing to do’ to join the IRA, their friends were involved, it was exciting, for others they had family involved, and amongst the republican paramilitaries, many could call on a lineage of republicans in their family stretching back to 1916 and they were socialised into Irish republicanism from an early age.

I can bring my family’s republican lineage back to James Connelly and back to the civil war. My grandfather worked for James Connelly and, my father was in prison in the 1940’s. My mother was a member of Cumann na mBan [women’s wing of the IRA], her brothers were imprisoned for republican activity and two more of my uncles on were also in prison for republican activity. (T41, PIRA, Belfast)

While loyalists lacked this long heritage of struggle and resistance, they often pointed to a history of family joining the British Army. However, they often found less support from their families for their illegal violent activities, particularly, when their family believed they should have joined legal armed groups to combat republicanism, such as the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), or the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) instead.

We took the decision to become paramilitaries and it wasn’t an easy decision, especially as I came from a security force background. But I got injured at work and I couldn’t become a policeman, so I became a paramilitary. (T82, UDA, Mid-Ulster)

However, many loyalists were socialized in the loyalist traditions, of the Orange Order or belonged to loyalist flute bands and were socialized into a very polarized Protestant, unionist and loyalist worldview.

Since I was a boy I was deeply involved with the loyal orders, the Orange Order, the Apprentice Boys, the Black Preceptory. I was steeped in loyalism. I never saw myself as a bigot, but reflecting back, I guess I was a bigot. But, I’ve moved on from that, the longer I lived, the more injustices, death and grief I witnessed, and religion doesn’t divide people in death and grief. (T66, UVF, Belfast)

*Summary of Theme 2*

For many of the individuals who joined the armed groups their route in was facilitated by family or friendship groups. Many of these peer groups formed up in the excitement of the sectarian riots, which were occurring across community interfaces, and in turn, these activities brought them in contact with paramilitaries and assisted them in graduating from street gangs into paramilitary groups. However, there were differences between loyalists and republicans in the role of the family, with many more loyalists encountering antagonism from their families for joining a proscribed group to combat the threat of Irish republicanism. However, many members of both loyalist and republican groups reported early socialization into republican or loyalist culture that framed their worldview and provided the environmental context for their future engagement.

*Theme 3: Ingroup Pressures*

In Northern Ireland’s segregated society Protestants and Catholics live separate lives, in what has been described as a ‘benign form of apartheid’ (Nagle & Clancy, 2010), this segregation into homogenous groups has a significant impact on people’s sense of identity, attitudes towards group members, perceptions of threat and biased attributions (Ferguson, Muldoon & McKeown, 2013). However, once the individuals join extremist groups within these already segregated homogeneous partisan communities, the small group pressures become amplified. Inside these extremist cliques, the individuals are further insulated from the outside world and different opinions, thus being involved in these groups create groupthink like conditions which foster conformity and remove barriers towards their involvement in extremist violence.

When I was twenty-one, my life was all about football, fishing and family, I’d, just had a young child. Nevertheless, even with all that, the pull or pressure, of what we faced at that time, that all became secondary to me. By then I’d sold myself completely to the UVF. I believed that was the most important role in my life. It completely took over every aspect of my life. The reason being that I wanted to dedicate myself to it. Until your caught, imprisoned, or friends are killed, you genuinely believed it was all for God and Ulster. (T26, UVF, East Antrim)

Being active in these organizations also increased participants’ sense of purpose, feelings of empowerment, efficacy and decreased moral ambiguity. Being a member also increased the sense of comradery and heightened the sense of collective identity. For most participants these feelings were then further magnified during imprisonment. These outlooks fuelled engagement and sustained extremism as articulated by these UVF and PIRA volunteers, reflecting back on the conflict.

This is going to sound bad, but many former combatants miss the conflict and most of them miss it because of the sense of the comradeship and the sense of purpose created by belonging to something important, oh and the excitement of danger! These things are created by conflict, and just because people can miss them, it doesn’t make them a bad person, it doesn’t mean they want to go out and kill people, but the conflict created things they miss. (T90, UVF, Mid-Ulster)

People felt they belonged to something important and this kept their spirits high, and it was easy to do what you did. It was clear what you were doing. (T37, PIRA, Female, Belfast)

*Summary of Theme 3*

Once the individual is a member of these secretive groups, they are subjected to small group dynamics that strengthen bonds of solidarity, feelings of efficacy and identification with ingroup members and the group’s cause. As these groups become more isolated and compliant to the group consensus, radicalization and the use of violence increases.

*Theme 4: Imprisonment*

It was not until the paramilitaries were imprisoned and spent time in prison away from the hot conflict on the streets of Northern Ireland that they began to develop their ideology, educate themselves, develop their political strategy and to radicalize themselves and their fellow political prisoners.

Back in Long Kesh we read Irish history and had politics lectures, we learnt more about everything. It was your first chance to read books on communism, revolution, Ché Guevara and James Connolly. All things that you wouldn’t have read as an ordinary teenage. But, in Long Kesh, these books were being passed around. Everybody was debating them. So you naturally wanted to understand it. We did a lot in Long Kesh, political and military education, along with sports, general reading and just fooling around. (T51, PIRA, Belfast)

In my generation, politics never entered your thoughts. You were never taught it in school, you never knew anything about your own history, I mean Irish history. It wasn’t until we went to jail that we studied our history. Before prison, I thought Northern Ireland was there from Biblical times, and I learnt that it wasn’t formed until the 1920s, and that was mind-blowing for me. (T98, UVF, Belfast)

As hinted at by the PIRA volunteer above, prison did not just radicalize your thinking, it was a transformational experience that would have been impossible to have experienced in the working class communities embroiled in conflict from which they came.

[In long Kesh] you structured your own day, and my day normally consisted of training, football, music and re-educating my mind. For those ten years I lived the life of a professional athlete, I trained and trained and trained. And I became educated about the history of Ireland. For me, prison was the most wonderful education I ever had, it was a very expensive education, but an absolutely tremendous one. (T26, UVF, East Antrim)

Much of the re-education in prison led to a move away from the sectarian or nationalistic view of the conflict that had fuelled the interviewees’ earlier violence. The space to think within prison fuelled a move towards more radical thinking heavily influenced by socialism and a rethinking of Irish history for both loyalists, particularly those from the UVF/RHC, and republicans more generally.

The prisoners would have virtually been the only people within the Protestant community who were discussing anything seriously. Inside the jail was the only place where serious debate was going on. People on the outside were talking about the lost tribe of Israel and all that rubbish. The real discussion of working class issues and politics was taking place in the prison system. (T76, UVF, Belfast)

I couldn’t articulate my views before I went to jail. I think jail gave me the time to sit down, read and clarify my thoughts. At times, like the hunger strikes, you’d be living in the moment, you’d be just trying to live. One thing the jail gave me is the ability to be analytical and critical. Not to take something at face value, or do something on the spur of the moment, which I may have done as a teenager or when I was in the middle of it. (T48, PIRA, Belfast)

While this theme is focusing on the role of prison in radicalization, the impact of incarceration is much greater than just comradery, radicalization and self-actualization. Prison could be a very difficult situation, particularly in times of protest, and some of the participants reflected on the negative side of imprisonment, and how the ability to educate and radicalize was very much dependant on when and where you were incarcerated.

Going to prison is the inevitable outcome of being a republican, you get shot, you get killed or you go to prison. When I went to prison I was looking for a hotbed of Irish republicanism. But, I was deeply shocked that it was not there at that time. Prison was a disappointment because of the fragmentation of the republican movement inside at that time, and therefore nothing political was going on (T46, PIRA, Belfast)

*Summary of Theme 4*

Almost every participant spent time in prison or had been interned without trial during the conflict. Imprisonment was viewed as an inevitable part of being a paramilitary, and it was viewed as just another facet of the struggle. Prison enhanced ingroup solidarity and provided the space to educate and radicalize away from the day-to-day action and reaction pressures of being a paramilitary.

Discussion

These findings reflect the core themes presented by former paramilitaries based on their accounts of how and why they became involved in violent extremism. While the four core themes share much similarity to previous antecedent factors and conceptual models of radicalization (Jenson, et al., 2016; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; Moghaddam, 2005) they clearly illustrate that a supportive environmental context and the role of perceiving an injustice or collective existential threat to a community the individual closely identifies with is key to pushing people towards extremism. The findings suggest initial engagement in extremism is primarily through reaction, rather than ideological radicalization, with ideological transformation coming much later in the process, demonstrating that there is not necessarily a connection between radicalization and seemingly ideological violence (Della Porta & Le Free, 2012). For most participants radicalization was due to their incarceration in a prison environment that promoted a political and ideological re-education, or after spending considerable time within an organization that was being radicalized by the leadership and wider membership.

The findings also demonstrate that being exposed to injustice, structural violence or direct threats to your ingroup or self, and the uncertainty this creates is a central to pushing people towards extremist or entitative groups (Hogg, 2014; Piazza, 2006). The movement towards using violence involves individual agency and is not a linear stimulus-response reaction. It requires the individual to interpret the circumstances they are faced with and delineate their reactions based on their world view, what is happening around them, the role of peer and familial role models, and the community discourses and explanations for the circumstances they are faced with. The findings emphasise the role of emotion and biased perception in this decision making processes, in line with experimental studies exploring ‘hot cognition’ and socio-political decision making (Lodge & Taber, 2005).

Once engaged with the armed groups, small group dynamics play a significant role in pushing the individual towards extremism, and legitimising actions taken. This matches the conceptualization presented in many of the current radicalization models (e.g., Sageman, 2008) and highlighted by the recent EADR research. These processes were also further amplified during imprisonment. For most participants it was not until their lengthy incarceration that they truly radicalized, in terms of developing considered political ideologies and strategies to underpin their acts of violent extremism, which were initially reactive or sectarian in character. This study set out to analyse narrative accounts from interviews with paramilitaries from across the political spectrum in Northern Ireland to fill gaps in the research on radicalization and pathways into violent extremism and to explore whether these accounts would map onto existing conceptual models, which could provide further insights on the Northern Irish political conflict. In line with Jensen et al’s (2016) research, the accounts presented here show the significance of identifying with a community in perceived crisis in attempting to explain antecedents of extremism. Then the role of collective identity, small group dynamics and the view that violence is the only solution to the problems faced by the ingroup augment this engagement in violence.

As with research exploring European foreign fighters traveling to Syria to join ISIS (Bond, 2014; Lindekilde, et al. 2016) mobilization to join these groups was facilitated through social relations with family and friends who were involved and seeking to become involved. These findings are also reflective of recent research (Simi et al., 2015) with North American white supremacists which illustrates how non-ideological factors (community crisis, experiences of trauma, in this case; delinquency, childhood trauma in the US case), may be greater risk factors than ideological motivations in fuelling engagement in seemingly ideologically motivated violence.

However, it is important to acknowledge that while the interviewees were not radicalized when they began to engage in seemingly politically motivated violence, they did sustain their careers as paramilitaries, at least partially, through a political re-education and reanalysis of their motivations for engaging in and supporting political violence. For many this post-hoc radicalization allowed them to defend and make sense of their violent activity and the violence of the group they were affiliated with. Therefore, radicalization is an important factor is sustaining and rationalizing extremism, if not initiating it.

While each conflict is unique, and transporting lessons from one context to another is not always straightforward (Hazleton, 2013), the findings here do resonate closely with findings from other contexts, even contexts were extremists do not have first-hand experiences of communal violence. As mentioned above, the findings point to the importance of kin and peers in fuelling mobilization, as witnessed with European Muslims and recent converts travelling to Syria to fight (e.g., Bond, 2014). Demographically, these participants are also similar to European foreign fighters, in that, most joined as young men, with only a minority of female volunteers (Bakker & de Bont, 2016). The paramilitaries were politically naïve on initial engagement, only through their involvement with the groups did they develop their understanding of politics and ideology. This initial lack of ideological knowledge was observed with European jihadist fighters who travelled to Syria, with less than 10% of French fighters travelling due to their religious beliefs, for example. (Bakker & de Bont, 2016; Lindekilde et al., 2016) Similarly, the Northern Irish paramilitaries were mobilized by feelings of fear, injustice and uncertainty, as were Belgian Jihadists who travelled to Syria (Coolsaet, 2016). The similarities do not end here, but this list provides an indication that the underlying psychological and social processes involved in pushing or pulling people into extremism are not fixed to ideology, locality or time.

Understanding how and/or why people understand their own pathways to radicalization is key if academics, practitioners or policy makers are to design effective counter-extremism interventions or programs. Many counter extremism interventions, such as UK Prevent strategy, are built around challenging ideology, promoting values, and safeguarding vulnerable young people. It is clear from this study that any intervention must focus on non-ideological factors and perceptions of injustice or grievance held by communities as this is the key precursor to involvement. These interventions then must be able to respond to these perceptions without exacerbating them and further alienating the community in order to challenge engagement in violent extremism.

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1. Internment without trial was introduced in August 1971 as a response to the growing violence. It lasted for a period of four years and almost 2,000 people were in interned without trial during this period. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)